

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RAILWAY POST OFFICES OF FRANCE

By Anthony Goodbody

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Our Society Librarian, Rick Martin, has been researching through back numbers of "Transit Postmark Collector" (Journal of the Mobile Post Office Society; USA) and located the original in TPC Vol 23, #6 November/December 1977, pages 59 to 63.

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JH Jones
TPO & Seapost Society
15th March 2010

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE RAILWAY POST OFFICES OF FRANCE
BY ANTHONY GOODBODY (MPOS # 457) SEPTEMBER 1977

Preface - I am writing this article at the request of the President. I make no claim to be an expert on the subject. There are many things which I do not know and others which I fail to understand. The reader requiring a more extensive treatment is referred to the references, on which I have drawn freely. The illustrations are traced from actual cancellations in my collection.

History - The Preliminary Period (1844-1855) - The first railway travelling post offices were introduced in France in the year 1844. The centenary of this event was celebrated by the issue of a stamp (Scott 472). It shows one of the early, richly decorated RPO coaches. A model of one of these may be inspected in the Postal Museum in Paris.

Postmarks are known from 1845 onwards but are normally found only on the backs of letters. Cancelling stamps they are extremely rare. They are all of type 1 (night), 20-21 mm diameter outer circle with serif capitals (Figure 2).

A total of 41 RPOs were introduced in this period, the majority starting from Paris, with postmarks which indicated the outer terminus only, e.g. "Ligne-de-Calais" for the Paris-Calais (and reverse) RPO etc. Those routes which did not touch Paris were indicated by both end points, e.g. "Nancy à Forbach".

The Lozenge Period (1852-1876) - In 1852 postmarks were introduced for the purpose of cancelling stamps. They were of the lozenge type, with serif capitals to indicate the route. This "PC 1" or "PC 2" for Paris-Calais, "SM 1" or "SM 2" for Strasbourg - Mulhouse etc. The numeral served to indicate the trip number. The absence of a numeral implies that there was only one trip per day.

The lozenge marks with serif capitals are all very rare except SM 2. In 1855, however, were introduced lozenge marks with sans-serif capitals (Figure 10). These are much more readily obtainable and there are a great number of different marks. Pothion lists over 400. They are found used in conjunction with dated marks of type 1 (day and night). The day time marks of type 1 are distinguished by the presence of an internal octagon rather than a circle (see Figure 1).

The Dated Postmark Period (1876-To date) - From 1876 the lozenge obliterations were replaced by dated marks of type 1 which hitherto had not been used to cancel stamps. Of course, these marks continued to be used as sorting marks and are indeed worth very much less used thus. Pothion states that an entire with stamps cancelled by an RPO mark is worth 10 times as much as an entire with the same RPO mark used simply as a sorting or transit mark. The demand for the latter, he says, is practically non-existent. He also states, rather surprisingly, that loose stamps with recognisable RPO marks are worth about one third of the price of an entire whose stamps are cancelled by the same mark. Obviously these remarks can only be generalisations and they do not, in any case, apply to the preliminary period.

From 1886 dates stamps of type 2 (figs 3 & 4) began to replace those of type 1. Type 2 had sans-serif capitals and a 24 mm. diameter outer circle. Again, day time marks were distinguished by the internal octagon.

Postmarks of type 2 were, in turn, replaced by type 3 (figs. 5 & 6) from 1904 onwards. Night mail marks of type 3 are 26-27 mm. diameter single ring while the day time marks are octagons of similar diameter.

It should be remarked that the dates quoted are those when the new marks were introduced. It is quite possible that marks of an earlier type persisted for many years after those dates, especially on routes which cancelled relatively little mail.

In all these postmarks the letter at the base indicated the crew. In times past quite high letters were encountered, but at present they run from A to D. For example, if all the RPOs leaving Paris on a particular night are using the letter B, the next night the letter C will be used. D is followed by A and the sequence carries on through week-ends although RPOs do not now operate on Saturdays or Sundays.

Special Categories of Postmark - Figure 7 shows what is roughly translated as an RPO entry mark. Mail crossing the frontier into France was at one time given a cachet to indicate the route by which it had come. This was often done on an RPO, indicated by the letters "AMB" in the postmark. The definitive work on this subject, which I have not been able to consult, is "Les Cachets d'entrees en France" by Gilbert Noel.

Figure 8 is more or less self explanatory but figure 9 is a puzzle. Obviously this mark is not designed for cancelling stamps as it is undated. Pothion states that they are rare except at the present time. I have not yet met anyone who can translate the term "Cachet de Service" into meaningful English.

Figures 16 and 17 show two more entry marks. I am not sure whether figure 17 is an RPO mark as the letters "AMB" are not present. Figure 18 shows an express train mark. "Rapide" marks of type 1 and type 2 were distinguished by a wavy inner circle.

Courriers - Convoyeurs Marks - The history of the courrier-convoyeur service goes back to about 1852. The words are usually translated "mail guard" although "convoyeur" just means train. The duty of the mail guard was probably akin to that of his American counterpart, the route agent. They were at first installed in 2nd. class compartments or luggage vans but later they occupied mail vans like those used by the full railway post offices. Courriers-convoyeurs were employed to look after mail collected and delivered at each station. Unlike the full railway post offices, however, they did not carry out sorting duties.



*Monsieur Moillerand.
Ministre de la Guerre
Paris
(Seine)*

A fine Courriers Convoyeur postmark on 1915 mourning cover addressed to French Minister of War in the World War I Cabinet .Scott #B1. Valence to Grenoble .

With few exceptions the courriers-convoyeurs did not use handstamps before 1865 in which year they were issued with an experimental type showing the town of posting only within the familiar wavy circle. The experimental type was replaced in 1867 by the first definitive type (figure 11). This showed the name of the town at the top, the number of the department in which the town was situated at the base (13 = Calvados) and, in between, the day of the month, an abbreviated indication of the route, (H.LIS = Honfleur - Lisieux) and the trip number. The month and the year are not shown.

Subsequent types showed the route in full. Type 2 (fig. 12) was in use from 1877 and had small serif letters. In the center part were the trip number and the date.

Type 3 (Figure 13) was similar but with sans-serif letters. It was introduced in 1886. Type 4 has been in use since 1904. An asterisk in place of the trip number indicates that there was only one trip.

Pothion's book lists well over 3600 different courier-convoyeur marks many of which exist in all three types (2-4)

and in both directions. Thus there could be anything up to 20,000 different marks not including those of type 1 or the experimental marks which are not listed.

According to a list of RPO and courrier-convoyeur marks which I recently received from the French Post Office, there are about 70 full RPO routes still operating in each direction, the majority of them out of Paris. There are also at least 40 courrier-convoyeur routes but I believe they only operate "as required by the volume of mail". Certainly when I was in Paris for two weeks last August I failed to catch up with a single one.

Finally, there are nine "Ambulants Routiers," the French version, I suppose, of the Highway Post Office.

Practical Notes - Getting current French RPO and courrier-convoyeur marks is not easy. Strictly speaking one has to be on the spot to do the posting. Certainly, as in England, the Post Office will not handle mail sent under separate cover. The only method which might work is to send stamped addressed envelopes to station masters at sizeable provincial towns along the route. The rate is 80 centimes for printed matter and 1.40 F for letters. This is surface mail. I do not have the air mail rates. One must be prepared for many failures especially among the courriers-convoyeurs. A list of the routes still operating is given below. All operate in both directions, except when indicated otherwise.

1977 list of French RPO Routes

Northern Section

Paris - Lille (1) & (2)
Paris - Dunkerque (2)

Eastern Section

Paris - Strasbourg (1) & (2)
Paris - Nancy
Paris - Metz
Paris - Sarrebruch (Return working
as courrier-convoyeur)
Paris - Belfort (1) & (2)
Paris - Givet (1) & (2)
Bâle - Luxembourg
Strasbourg - Lyon (2)

South Eastern Section

Paris - Lyon (1) & (2)
Paris - La Méditerranée
Paris - Sète
Paris - Maçon
Paris - Marseille (2)
Paris - Besançon (No return working)
Paris - Pontarlier (2)
Paris - Chambéry
Paris - Evian
Paris - St. Etienne
Paris - Clermont (2)
Paris - Vichy (No return working)
Paris - Grenoble
Belfort - Dijon
Lyon - Briançon
Clermont - Nîmes (1)
Annecy - Paris

South Western Section

Paris - Toulouse (1) & (2)
Paris - Cerbère
Paris - Rodez
Paris - Bordeaux Rapide
Paris - Pyrénées (2)
Paris - Bordeaux (3)
Paris - La Rochelle
Limoges - Montauban (2)
Limoges - Toulouse (1)
Brive - Toulouse

Toulouse - Cerbère
Toulouse - Port Bou
Narbonne - Montpellier
Toulouse - Ax-Les-Thermes
Toulouse - Pau (1)
Bordeaux - Irun (1) & (2)
Bordeaux - Nantes
Bordeaux - Sète
Bordeaux - Toulouse (2)
Bordeaux - Lyon
Nantes - Lyon

Western Section

Paris - Nantes (1) & (2)
Paris - Vannes
Paris - Brest Rapide
Paris - St. Brieuc
Paris - Rennes
Paris - Caen
Paris - St. Lô
Paris - Le Havre (1)

Mediterranean Section

Marseille - Lyon Rapide
Marseille - Lyon (2) & (3)
Marseille - Toulouse
Sète - Lyon
Marseiller - Nice (1)

1977 List of Courriers-Convoyeurs

Northern Section

Paris - Calais Maritime
Paris - Tourcoing
Paris - Lille
Paris - Jeumont
Paris - Maubeuge (Return working from Aulnoye)

Eastern Section

Paris - Nancy (No return working)
Paris - Strasbourg (No return working)
Paris - Bâle (2 trips)
Strasbourg - Lyon

South Eastern Section

Paris - Lyon (4 trips to Lyon but only
3 trips back)
Paris - Dijon (No return working)
Paris - Mont Cenis

South Western Section

Paris - Bourges
Paris - Limoges (1) & (2) (No return working
for Trip No. 2)
Paris - Tours (1) (No return working)
Paris - Bordeaux (1) & (2) (Only No. 2
trip back)
Paris - Poitiers
Toulouse - Montrejeau (No return working)
Bordeaux - Irun (No return working)
Bordeaux - La Rochelle
Bordeaux - Angouleme
Cardenac - Limoges (No return working)
Lyon - Bordeaux (No return working)

Western Section

Paris - Nantes

Paris - Quimper
Paris - Rennes
Paris - Granville
Paris - Argentan
Paris - Caen
Paris - Le Havre (No return working)
Paris - Rouen

Mediterranean Section

Marseille - Lyon (No return working)
Marseille - Sète (2 trips)
Montpellier - Narbonne (No return working)
Marseille - Nice (3 trips)

1977 List of French Highway Post Offices

Le Havre - Rouen
Argentan - Evreux
Quimper - Brest
Saintes - Poitiers
Villefranche de Rouerque - Toulouse
Brioude - Clermont Ferrant
Ales - Montpellier
Toulon - Marignane
Digne - Marignane

Travelling Post Office (Bureaux Ambulants) Postmarks



Fig. 1

Type 1 (Day)



Fig. 2

Type 1 (Night)

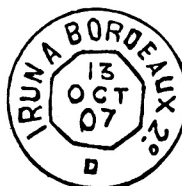


Fig. 3

Type 2 (Day)



Fig. 4

Type 2 (Night)



Fig. 5

Type 3 (Day)

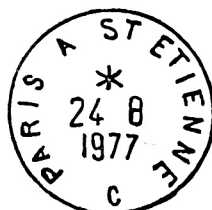


Fig. 6

Type 3 (Night)



Fig. 7

"Cachet d'Entree
par Ambulant."

(R.P.O. Entry Mark.)

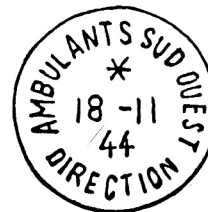


Fig. 8

R.P.O. Headquarters
(South West Div.)

TOULOUSE A BORDEAUX E

Fig. 9 "Cachet de Service"

Courriers Convoyeurs (Mailguard)
Postmarks



Fig. 10 "Lozange Obliter-
ator



Fig. 11
Type 1



Fig. 12
Type 2



Fig. 13
Type 3

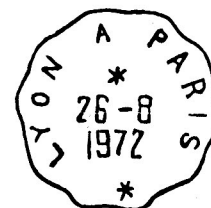


Fig. 14
Type 4

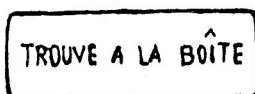


Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

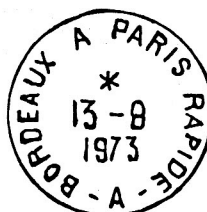


Fig. 18

Acknowledgements and Bibliography

I am grateful to the Direction Générale des Postes, Paris for providing me with a list of railway and highway post offices, also to Mr. Michael Arthur of the Railway Philatelic Group for providing me with other up-to-date practical information.

Books and articles consulted are:

"France, Bureaux Ambulants, 1845-1965" by Jean Pothion published by La Poste aux Lettres, 17, Faubourg Montmartre, Paris 9.

"Catalogue des Cachets Courriers-Convoyeurs-Lignes, 1877-1966" by the same author and publisher.

"The Railway Postmarks of France" by William Piggott, an article in the Philatelic Magazine, March 18, 1966.